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SUBJECT: OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL: STATEMENT ON UZBEKISTAN

¶1. Post is authorized to make the following statement at the February 28, 2008, meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna:

Begin Text:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States welcomes the limited progress made recently by Uzbekistan toward fulfilling its Helsinki Commitments.

We welcome the Government of Uzbekistan's decision to release from imprisonment a number of human rights defenders and amnesty two Christian leaders, Salavat Serikbayev and Nikolai Zulfikarov, who had been convicted of teaching religion illegally. These are positive steps concerning the protection of human rights and religious freedom. We urge the Government of Uzbekistan to build upon these steps, for example by easing registration criteria for religious groups, allowing minority religious groups to worship freely, and permitting religious materials to be published or imported for their use.

We take note of Mr. Yusupov's statement in the Permanent Council on February 14th that the Government of Uzbekistan continues to review the cases of imprisoned human rights defenders. While we continue to call on the Government to release all political prisoners, we particularly urge the Government to include in this review imprisoned Pentecostal Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, and Jehovah's Witness Irfan Hamidov. We also believe that the Mutabar Tojiboyeva and Sanjar Umarov cases warrant urgent review due to reports that their health continues to deteriorate in prison. There have also been reports that the condition of Jamshid Karimov has worsened in psychiatric detention, where we believe he continues to be held against his will.

The United States also welcomes the recent reopening of Human Rights Watch in Tashkent after it was forced to close its office in July 2007, when its last expatriate staff member was refused accreditation by the Government. The opening of three new resource centers for local non-governmental organizations and the award of 22 grants to non-governmental organizations are also encouraging signs regarding the development of civil society in Uzbekistan. We hope that there will be more progress on these fronts in line with OSCE standards in the coming weeks and months.

As always, we support the important role that the OSCE Project Coordinator's Office in Tashkent can play in assisting the Government of Uzbekistan to fulfill its Helsinki commitments. The Project Coordinator's Office submitted to the authorities in Tashkent last October a list of useful projects it would like to initiate in 2008. We are looking to the Government to finish its review of this project list promptly so that the OSCE office can commence with its new work.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

